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Rethinking Simultaneity (Text For A Performance)

1/ What is Leslie Feist reminding us about when she sings "I Feel It All"?¹ This is no trivial question. What kind of sense would be capable of feeling everything, everywhere, here and now? It has been argued, recently, that such a sense used to be called the common sense, something like an inner touch that allows living beings to perceive that they perceive. If it is true what scholars say, namely that this sense has gone lost in our modern time and requires no less than a veritable archeology in order to be retrieved (not as a kind of origin but more like a beginning, a traumatic archè that cannot be accessed but needs to be circumscribed instead), then the thought of simultaneity is in danger.² For surely, the sense with which one feels it all would be the sense that is particularly attuned to simultaneity, to multiple things happening in multiple places at the same time. This text and the reflection on simultaneity that it contains are part of a broader attempt to recover this sense that ties together all sensing living beings.

2/ It appears that Belgium is the best lit of all European countries, a tiny triangle visible even from space when you behold the European continent at night. This is mostly due to Belgium's highway lighting. A website documenting European roads explains that Belgian highways are the best lit in the world, noting in addition that Belgium pioneered the use of high-mast lighting for its roads.³ I remember this highway lighting from my childhood. Stretched out on the backseat of my parents' car, I would see these masts of light pass by as we were speeding home after a family party that had gone on long past my bedtime. Imagining the road continuing all across the globe kept me from sleeping and put me on the track of all the millions of other lives that were taking place simultaneously to mine. Pro-/E-jecting me into space, Belgium's highmast lighting put me in touch with what I would now call "planetary life." Provided one remains aware of the word's higher degree of abstraction, you could also say that it inspired in me a sentiment of what today goes by the name of "globalization."⁴

3/ At the same time that this pro-/e-jection put me in touch with planetary life, it also risked making it impossible for me to live at all. While it made my breath swell into the breath of the entire planet – in winter steaming up the windows of the car –, it also brutally cut it off, and for reasons that I think are worth going into. Looking at the high-mast lighting, I was visited by the specter of responsibility that my vision of connectedness called forth. Many years later, this specter would come back to me in all its singularity when, in a class I took on chaos theory, I read about a butterfly batting its wings in the Atlas Mountains and setting into motion a series of events that would eventually lead to the destruction of Los Angeles.⁵ (Naturally, Los Angeles, city of angels, city of catastrophe.) Or, as the professor of a class on transnationalism put it: "You flush a toilet in New York and at the same moment a child dies in China. Are the two events related?"⁶ Does the simultaneity of these two events imply causality? Does it – simultaneity? causality? – imply responsibility?

4/ Although the child was of course not asking these questions in exactly the same way, I am sure they were already dawning upon me at that time; and even in their unformulated form, or perhaps precisely because they were unformulated, I found them paralyzing. How could I do anything at all if even the slightest action – batting one's wings, flushing a toilet – could have catastrophic consequences? You may find such nihilism utterly ungrounded, but I am raising its specter (still following my teachers) while thinking of other simultaneities – causalities, responsibilities – that we accept perhaps more easily, for example between a shirt that was "made in Bangkok" and that is sold in Paris, France, where I now live. I try not to buy clothes that were fabricated in countries where I know slave labor still exists (but who can guarantee there is no slave labor in New York?), but on what grounds do I think my not buying these clothes will have any actual effect on the conditions of workers in a remote corner of the planet? If simultaneity is a relation, what kind of relation is it? Is there causality to it, does it demand responsibility? What kinds? These are issues that in many ways feel dated, but that are still very much of this time.⁷

5/ To imagine my life as simultaneous with other lives also paralyzed me because it took me into the limits of what I was capable of thinking. Looking back on it now, what I felt in the backseat of my parents' car was not necessarily "felt rationally" (if such a phrase exists). No. I recall it more as a sensation that exceeded proper reason and instead put me in touch with life in a non-rational or other-than-rational way.⁸ It brought me closer not only to myself, other human beings, the planet, but also to aliens (by projecting me into space) and ghosts (by raising the specter of responsibility). It also put me in touch with the animal that I am;⁹ for as I was watching my breath steam up the car window I could feel my heart beating in my chest, a muscle infused with a life-force that I could not and still cannot comprehend. It is possible that simultaneity posed a limit to my capacities for thought because it poses a limit to language (outside of which, some have argued, it is not possible to think). For what is simultaneity, and when can something be said to be simultaneous?¹⁰

6/ When in the previous paragraphs I spoke of something being simultaneous, I was referring to a very particular something, namely life. Life is not a "thing" like a table or a book; tables and books may not be devoid of life, but they are still not alive in the same way that human beings, animals, or plants are. The difference between life and a table in this context should be clear (at least for now; but I will have to revisit this claim later on). Of a table, one cannot say that it is happening; stretching the philosophical meaning of the verb a bit, it might be possible to say that a table exists; but although something can be happening to it, or something may be done to it, the table itself does neither do nor happen. As a particular something, it is thus different from life, a difference I propose to give the name here of "event." Whereas life is an event, a table is not, or at least not in the way in which I understand it here. All of this follows from the fact that one cannot say of two tables that they are simultaneous. Simultaneity is a quality or state of an event; this is the first thing I would like to note.

7/ Second, it is worth pointing out that even of an event, one will not say that it is simultaneous. An event is always simultaneous with another event, i.e. that which is simultaneous is always both itself and not itself, split between itself and something else with which it exists in a shared quality or state. When one is talking about simultaneity, one is therefore never talking of a clearly definable and unified something, but of something that is inherently split between two or more events. In theories of simultaneity, the difference of this split is spatial: there is simultaneity between two events that take place at two different locations but at the same time. Spatial difference and temporal similarity are simultaneity's conditions. For a minimal definition of simultaneity, these two conditions suffice; one could also add a third, however, and say that in order for two events to be simultaneous, there also needs to be a relation between these two events, i.e. their simultaneity should not merely be temporal but the events should also be related in a more than merely temporal way – for example, they should depend on each other, or their simultaneity should be planned, staged, or coordinated.

8/ Each of these three conditions can be drawn into question (simultaneity is not absolute but relative, as Albert Einstein already knew). What counts, for example, as a relation? From what moment on can one begin to speak of a plan, when does the world become a stage, where does coordination end or begin? How far apart do two locations actually have to be in order for two or more events taking place at the same time to be simultaneous? If one stages a performance in Helsinki and Berlin at the same time, one can clearly say that these two performances are simultaneous. If one does the same thing in two different neighborhoods in Berlin, one can say the same. If at one particular location in Berlin, there are two performances staged at the same time, one can probably still say the same. If those two performances are taking place on the same stage, can one still say the same? If they merge with each other, whirl around each other so that one becomes indistinguishable from the other, can one still say the same? How to separate one from the other? How to distinguish the two events between which simultaneity is supposed to exist? How much spatial difference does one need in order for simultaneity to be possible?

9/ A similar deconstruction can be uncovered in simultaneity's temporal condition. Simultaneity exists between two events taking place at two different locations at the same time. But what does one mean by "at the same time"? Clearly, one does not mean that two events are simultaneous because they take place between eight and ten in the evening, because this time in New York is not the same as the same time in Brussels. And even if the events would be coordinated to take place from twelve noon to two in the afternoon in New York and from six to eight in the evening in Brussels, and thus take place at the same time, it would still take the finest technology – I am not sure if such technological exactitude is even available to us – for the two events to take place exactly at the same time. When one says "at the same time," therefore, what one is really saying is "roughly at the same time," and simultaneity's temporal condition is always undermined by the incalculability of time itself. (Time is, after all, not

something that is in nature, but a mere representation; in that sense its clock is always behind, and does not tick in exact simultaneity with nature.) There is, in other words, a difference that haunts the similarity of simultaneity, a sameness that haunts its difference, and a relativity that haunts its absolute – three specters that reveal it to be anything but stable.

10/ At this point, it is necessary to introduce a further instability, namely the instability of the event itself. It's all good and well to say that there is simultaneity between two events, but this may create the impression that simultaneity – itself inherently instable – would be suspended between the stable poles of two or more events. As should be obvious from the connection between life and the event that I established above, such an impression is false, and fails to think the life of the event, or what one could also call the eventuality of the event. The instability of simultaneity does not remain limited to the space between two events, as if the events were to mark the borders at which instability stops. No. There is not merely simultaneity between two or more events but also within these events themselves, i.e. the simultaneity between them becomes part of them; it is infectious, it affects them in a structural way.

11/ This opens up further problems of time, specifically of chronology, because it becomes impossible to say what came first: simultaneity, or the event? Both chicken and egg, and neither, there can only be simultaneity if there is an event – if there are events – and simultaneity produces events, it produces the event. Such a definition of both simultaneity and the event forces me to revisit the distinction between events and "things" such as tables or books that I set up earlier on, to recognize that to call two tables simultaneous means to turn these tables into events, i.e. to look at them in such a way that they become alive. This requires an effort of the imagination that is not ideological but critical. Inversely, to deny the simultaneity of two events means to reduce these events to things and to deprive them of their life. This would involve the imagination as well, this time not as critique but as ideology. Philosophically speaking, what is revealed here is that neither simultaneity nor the event, nor "thing" even, are ontological categories but qualities or states that are produced not merely within a plurality but ultimately also within each element that constitutes it. The main point however is that if simultaneity exists between two or more events, it is not limited to this in between but simultaneity is part of this event itself, it undermines all notions of the event as stable, homogenous, fixed – as being. Event is crucially becoming, and simultaneously so.

12/ To recapitulate: simultaneity is not the property of something, but of two or more things. It is the property of two or more events. It is a strange property, however, because it remains improper to these events – it exists in between them, in the void between two or more events. At the same time, as I have explained, it cannot be limited to this in between but it needs to be thought as constitutive of the events themselves, as internal to the event, as what belongs to it as not belonging to it, the part of the event that is not a part of it. This is what constitutes the aliveness of the event, its constitutive instability. The event is alive, and its life perpetually escapes it, it is neither proper nor improper to it

but it constitutes rather something like its im-property – not a being but a becoming that I have also called the eventuality of the event. This eventuality is never unified, homogenous, stable. It is moving. Heraclitus is supposed to have said that you never step into the same river twice; to which one of his students reportedly added: "not even once." To think simultaneity does not mean merely to think the similarity/difference between two events; it means to think similarity/difference within a single event and thus to draw into question any exceptionalism or identitarianism that might constitute it (thus, I had to revise the opposition between life and things that I initially set up).

13/ Simultaneity is a relation of sameness and difference. It creates similarity between two otherwise different things, and it creates difference between two otherwise similar things. Both the sameness and the difference that it creates, however, are haunted by their so-called opposites, which (as I have shown) they contain. Simultaneity thus brings together as it separates, and separates as it brings together, and its togetherness is haunted by separation in the same way that its separation is haunted by togetherness. It is, in this sense, profoundly political, and (I would add) radically democratic. In contrast to actually existing democracies, which no longer have anything to do with the demos and the polis of the Greeks and the idea of identity-fracturing popular power that they stand for, simultaneity unites without creating a fiction of total unity, and separates without creating a fiction of total separation. This – the political – is where it borders with the theological, and specifically with the god of Christianity, who was simultaneously able to sovereignly rule as one and govern as three, through what in philosophy has recently been thought as the *dispositif* of the trinity.¹¹ Dictionary explanations of simultaneity often mention that it contains a supernatural or divinely inspired element; this element is the point, I would argue, where simultaneity's deconstruction and the eventuality that it enables one to think slip into transcendence and are pro-/e-jected into space.

14/ However, simultaneity does not end in this position but merely passes through it, as I have tried to say at the beginning. It is thrown back into planetary life. Adopting a term from the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, from whose recent book on sovereignty and government I have silently been drawing, I would say that it affects a profanation of the theological position by merely adopting it as a (perhaps) necessary stage on the road to worldliness – a road that does not go from point A to point B but is condensed into the here and now, and comes about through a minimal shift in perspective.¹² Simultaneity is a working through of theology and an entering into the world. It is profoundly worldly, which is not the same as secular. Simultaneity passes through space in order to throw one into life, into one's own life, the lives of others, of the planet, aliens, ghosts, animals, gods (even secularists cannot deny that god has a life, and a profoundly worldly one).

15/ Although every life at first sight can only be simultaneous with other lives, I argue that in the final instance the challenge that simultaneity poses is to think of every life as simultaneous with itself, as a something that is always split from itself, divided in itself from the very life that it is. This is what constitutes its

aliveness, the eventuality of its life-event. There is no French life, male life, human life, vegetarian life, and so on but all these identitarian categories are ultimately divided from themselves because they are simultaneous with the very life they are trying to capture (and that escapes their attempts to do so). This is what simultaneity's challenge ultimately consists in, a challenge that becomes felt as soon as simultaneity comes to be thought of as a mode of the life-event. This challenge is not merely a challenge to the individual but also to the collective. How can one think societies, and ethical and political communities, as communities of life, as simultaneous collective forms that would be suited to the life they aim to represent? That are simultaneous not only with other collectives but with the very life from which they are split, that destabilizes their institution and constitution? It is this rethinking of the collective as a becoming simultaneous that is also a becoming-alive that holds the possibility of a truly planetary community (beyond the trans- or multi-national collectives that ultimately preserve and continue the identitarian and exceptionalist politics of the nation-state). My double is not merely another that exists simultaneously to me but I am my double and my double is me; I am another, as Arthur Rimbaud already had it, and the other is me. This is how Sigmund Freud's notion of the uncanny can ultimately become the starting point for a psychoanalytic politics.¹³

16/ The discovery of simultaneity is not only liberating. It can also be traumatic, as I acknowledged at the beginning; it cuts off one's breath, it risks preventing one from living. Something happens with becoming-simultaneous that cannot fully be integrated into the subject. Becoming-simultaneous cannot be fully mastered. Its modality is that of someone or something that is always other than who, what, when, or where that particular someone or something is. In that sense, it is comparative. In order to perceive this simultaneity, one needs to take up a transcendental position, and although such a position is necessary, it is also impossible because to imagine it means to be thrown back into the world, which now reveals itself as changed. I am echoing here Theodor Adorno's remarks about a philosophy that would be practiced from the impossible standpoint of redemption.¹⁴ Such a necessary impossibility can be traumatic, and paralyzing. It is not easy being one's own double, it requires an imaginative and quasi-schizophrenic effort to perceive one's proper speech as lip-synched, or hear one's proper song as sung by a collective.¹⁵ But these are precisely the individual and collective challenges that simultaneity poses.

17/ I first confronted this challenge on the Belgian highways that, although they obviously lead to places, make up the network of roads that constitutes a map, and – thanks to the high-mast lighting – are visible even from space, also always somehow appeared lost to me (to echo the title of David Lynch's film). It would come back to me many times after: looking at the starry Flemish skies; taking the downtown local subway train in New York and suddenly seeing my fellow travelers in the express train pass by on the adjoining track, their lives exposed in the darkness underground by the subway's artificial light; celebrating new year on a rooftop in Berlin, with fireworks exploding everywhere, all of it at the same time, or almost at the same time, and me wondering: how can it be new year everywhere at the same time? How long does new year last? For a minute

around midnight; until the night has once more turned into day; for an entire year? When does the newness wear off and turn into the old? When the fireworks have stopped?

18/ Simultaneity is the mode of life, except it has been forgotten that this is the case. Common grammar in fact almost prevents one from saying "I am simultaneous." It can be said, of course, (since I just said it) but there is something about it that does not quite sound right, that indicates the statement exists at the limits of the linguistically and (therefore also) philosophically acceptable. As Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things* has shown, history is about certain things becoming sayable at certain points in time – a becoming that marks a change not simply in the order of saying but also in the order of thinking and what is thought of as true.¹⁶ Globalization, with all the similarities and differences that it has created, has certainly brought the world closer together. At the same time, however, one gets the distinctive sense that it has pushed it further apart, a situation that has been exploited by power politics and capitalism. They have relentlessly exploited the simultaneity of globalization in ways that might be beyond repair.

19/ Today, the simultaneity that I have talked about is usually labeled a terrorist threat, and the only good simultaneity is dead simultaneity, or rather a simultaneity that has been kept alive until the point of death, a resuscitated simultaneity that barely has any life left in it. Simultaneity and the life-event with which it is inextricably associated have become the targets of power, even though power also claims to defend them. But simultaneity persists as a critique of (a certain kind of) universalist, identitarian, and exceptionalist attempts to contain it. There are places in society where such simultaneity is still being thought: theory is one of them, I would argue, and the arts are another. If simultaneity is the proper mode of life, art provides its form because every artwork takes place at a distance from itself, through its proper disarticulations, as simultaneous with itself, as the eventuality of a life-event. Theory reflects this, intervenes in it, pushes it forward; it becomes part of art and ultimately art. (And vice versa.) Every artwork holds within itself its proper unworking. It is this limit that opens it up onto the potentiality that it actualizes but preserves as potentiality. Art is the form of individual and collective life.

20/ In closing, then, a work of art, that does not merely illustrate but think some of the thoughts that I have formulated here: Mark Tansey's *Action Painting II*.¹⁷ In the background, a space shuttle is quickly rising into the sky; an electronic clock in the foreground indicates that eight seconds have passed since lift-off. And yet, all of the painters in the image have already completed their painting of the launch. Tansey is suggesting a simultaneity that is impossible: it is not possible that the painters have completed their paintings in the eight seconds that it took the space shuttle to rise into the sky. This impossibility has usually been read negatively, i.e. as a critique of a certain ideological simultaneity in representative painting, namely the idea that it would somehow be possible to paint an event simultaneously to the event. Only photography is capable of such a thing – and here one would have to emphasize, of course, the painterly dimensions of the

photograph, which would distance even the photograph from the event. In other words: if the event is part of the photograph and the painting, it is so in a wholly other way, not as a represented event but as an eventuality that continues in the life of the artwork, whether painting or photograph. This is, I would say, the positive contribution of Action Painting II: that it invites one to think art and event together, reveals instead of their impossible simultaneity the simultaneity of the artwork with itself, so that the disjunction between art and event – which is obvious – is actually overcome into a continuation that is more subversive, more artful, more political.

¹ Feist. *The Reminder*. Cherry Tree, 2007.

² Cf. Heller-Roazen, Daniel. *The Inner Touch: Archeology of a Sensation*. New York: Zone Books, 2007. / My methodological remarks were inspired by: Agamben, Giorgio. "Oikonomia, gloire, désœuvrement: pour une généalogie théologique du gouvernement." *Amphithéâtre* 45 B, Université Paris 6-Pierre et Marie Curie. 14th, 18th, 21st, 25th, 30th Jan. 2008.

³ Cf. <<http://europe.aaroads.com/>>

⁴ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Death Of A Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.

⁵ Schenkel, Elmar. "Chaos." Universität Leipzig, Spring 2001.

⁶ Robbins, Bruce. "Transnational Culture: Theory and Practice." Columbia University, Spring 2003.

⁷ I had two texts in mind when I wrote this: Klein, Naomi. *No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies*. New York: Picador, 2000; and: Robbins, Bruce. "The Sweatshop Sublime." In: *PMLA* 117:1 (January 2002), 84-97.

⁸ Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*.

⁹ I take this turn of phrase from the title of: Derrida, Jacques. "The Animal That Therefore I Am (More To Follow)." Trans. David Wills. In: *Critical Inquiry* 28 (Winter 2002), 369-418.

¹⁰ The reflection that follows was partly inspired by: Simondon, Gilbert. *L'Individuation Psychique et Collective*. Paris: Aubier, 2007.